DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 186 922 CS 205 562

AUTHOR Spigelmire, Lynne
TITLE The Best Stylists: A Survey of Editors, and Implications for the Teaching of Style in Freshman Composition Courses.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (31st, Washington, DC, March 13-15, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Authors; Educational Needs; Expressive Language; Higher Education; *Language Attitudes; *Language Styles; *Literary Styles; Research; Surveys; Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Editors

ABSTRACT

A survey of 112 editors from magazines, newspapers, and publishing houses was conducted to obtain their judgments about prose style, the best prose stylists, and representative works by those stylists. Of the 112 editors surveyed, only 22 responded with useful data. The results indicated very little consensus among editors, and almost no correlation between the genre of their work and the writers they cited. In all, 57 authors were mentioned. Some of the most frequently mentioned stylistic qualities were clarity, elegance/grace, establishing a consistent personal voice, and simplicity/spareness. Beyond the basic requirements of clarity, orderliness, grace, and fluency, it appeared that the editors thought the best writers were those who had a clear conception of their audience and who crafted an intimacy with that audience. The findings suggest that, since voice and tone were considered important factors in good, effective writing, teachers will need to discover ways of developing these elusive skills in student writers. (RL)

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The Best Stylists: A Survey of Editors, and Implications for the Teaching of Style in Freshman Composition Courses

Lynne Spigelmire
Boston University

CS205562

As teachers and as former students who had to learn to write, we all realize that an important part of learning to write is developing a style--learning to make conscious and effective decisions about diction, syntax and arrangement. In lower division writing courses, style is now taught in a number of ways: among these are the use of linguistic models like sentence-combining, and the use of the rhetorical modes as models. I have been teaching basic and developmental writers for eight years, yet it is still not clear to me what works best when I want to teach style. Most of the research in the area of style is concerned with the use of sentence-combining, and most sentence-combining enthusiasts would probably agree with Max Morenberg's view that models are not useful in teaching writing. In the February 1980 issue of College Composition and Communication, in a review of Thomas Cooley's Norton Sampler, Morenberg once again disagreed with the view that students become better writers by reading professionally written essays and analyzing their rhetorical devices and techniques:

> I do not believe it, any more than I believe one can learn to pitch in the major leagues by watching movies of Tom Seaver and analyzing his delivery. So I don't think Professor Cooley's book--or any other essay anthology--will help students write better, no matter how readable its essays, how well they are arranged, how innovative its apparatus, or how much discussion the essays engender.

Morenberg's remarks echo the criticism made by Alfred Kitzhaber in 1963 that the proliferation of indistinguishable essay anthologies in composition programs indicated "uncertainty about the aims, methods and proper content of the course."

Both Morenberg's and Kitzhaber's comments challenging the usefulness of models in teaching writing are relevant to my concern here, the usefulness of models in the teaching of style. This essay summarizes the results of my survey of editors from newpapers, magazines and publishing houses, and the implications these results have for teachers of undergraduate writing, particularly

in these four areas: (1) the degree to which prose models are useful in teaching style; (2) criteria for selecting such prose models; (3) the definitions of style and of "good prose style"; and (4) the relationship between what is often recognized by editors as good style and the rather amorphous quality variously referred to as voice, creation ofan intimacy with the audience, or accomodation to the audience.

Most anthologies used in freshman writing courses are intended to be models for structure, not style, though many teachers use essays by professional writers to teach both structure and style. The essays included in these anthologies are usually arranged according to rhetorical modes, and are intended to serve as models for students learning to write in the various modes, such as description, narration, comparison and contrast, analysis, and classification.[1] However, many teachers of freshman writing assume that students can develop their writing styles by reading and imitating professional writers ; that is, principle of imitatio still informs many of our courses, although few researchers have explored whether models can actually enable a student to develop her or his style. In fact, few of us agree on a definition of style.

In the past ten years, almost all of the research on style in freshman writing has been quantitative, related to researchers' interest in students' syntactic maturity. Researchers such as Piché and Crowhurst have been able to make correlations between a writer's audience awareness and his syntactic maturity, or number of T-units per sentence, number of embeddings, and so on. But all of the literature on sentence-combining (O'Hare, Strong, Daiker, San Jose and others) and on quantitative stylistic analysis of student writing samples has shifted the focus away from esthetic judgments of style, and away from an admittedly subjective

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[1] In this essay I use James Kinneavy's taxonomy.

examination of the ways teachers impart ideas about style to student writers. Although Daiker (1979) had described specific ways that repeated examinations of passages from Hemingway helped student writers, it is still necessary to examine the efficacy of models in teaching style.

Those of us who teach freshman composition realize that the range of authors represented in the newer anthologies is so wide that there is very little overlap from collection to collection. Nor are the criteria for selecting these models very clear; many editors appear to choose what is au courant, or what appeals to their own tastes. This represents a change from 15 or 20 years ago, when most anthologies contained representative works by Peter Drucker, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Forster, Woolf, E.B. White, and Rachel Carson.

To conduct the survey, I gathered names of 112 editors, from magazines like Time and Newsweek to The New York Review of Books and Science; from fifty newspapers, including The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the Philadelphia Bulletin; and from publishing houses ranging from university presses to large paperback producers. In a cover letter, I asked editors to define style as they would use the term in their daily critical judgments about prose, and to list the best prose stylists, and to cite representative works by each author.

The results of the survey were somewhat surprising. Of 112 editors contacted, 77 did not respond at all. Thirteen wrote saying that they would not participate; sometimes they explained that their schedules were too busy, some simply did not believe that editors should make scholarly or academic judgments about style. Twenty-two editors sent back substantial responses, that is, a list of authors and representative works, sometimes accompanied by working definitions of style. The substantial responses ranged from telegraphic notes on the components of style to two or three pages letters, such as those from Jeffrey Burke of Harper's; Katherine Livingston, the book review editor of Science, and William Bennett, of the Harvard University Press.

The results indicated very little consensus among editors, and almost no correlation between the genre of the periodical and the writers cited by an editor. Figure 1 shows the 12 most frequently mentioned writers, and the number of times each one was mentioned. In all, 57 authors were mentioned by 21 respondents. This great spread reflects the various special interests of magazines like Burke at Harper's or Hoge of the Chicago Sun-Times. Burke, for example, chose decidedly literary authors: Wilfrid Sheed, Evan Connell and Hugh Kenner. However, the results of the survey indicate very little consensus among the editors who sent substantial responses. Figure 2 shows the 15 categories which appeared in some form in the definitions of style. Although most respondents offered succinct definitions, editors from four publications wrote lengthy, detailed definitions, and some editors accompanied their definitions with disclaimers which emphasized that style really cannot be defined; for example, Lee Goerner of Knopf wrote, "Style, like the word 'class,' seems to defy definition (either one has it or one doesn't.)" Burke wrote a two page definition of style; though he includes the qualities of subtlety, clarity and inventiveness, he dwells longest on voice, and what he sees as two of its components, diction and tone:

> Nothing tires so quickly as the grandly anonymous essay, and yet few things are as difficult as making yourself, your point of view, known without splashing the first person all over the page. Hence to diction and tone, and consistency in both. The ill-chosen word leaps off the page and chokes the careful reader with its inappropriateness.

Abstracting stylistic qualities from the respondents' definitions was not difficult if the qualities were mentioned outright, for example: clarity, grace, fluency, establishment of a consistent personal voice, wit, spareness. Often, however, I had to invent new, and rather subjective categories, such as "creation of intimacy with the reader."

The list of qualities in Figure 1 begins with the disclaimer,"Style cannot be defined," and includes terms which are subjective. These generally require that the user define the terms adequately, since tone appropriate for subject matter, establishment of a consistent personal voice, creation of an intimacy with the reader, audience awareness, and even significant subject matter are all highly subjective qualities. For example, William Bennett did not mention Didion as one of his choices because he considers her a "miniaturist"; he places McPhee, Kael, Trillin and Wolfe in this category as well. All of these authors appear in the list of stylists mentioned more than once (Figure 2). Bennett's list of best stylists included Thomas, Mailer and Galbraith; in his letter responding to the questionnaire, Bennett explained his standards for "significant subject matter"--Mencken, Edmund Wilson, Cobbett, Hazlitt and Carlyle. Of Tom Wolfe's Work, Bennett wrote, "He is entertaining, but isn't another Carlyle." Accordingly, Bennett defends his "nominations" of Thomas and Mailer:

> Neither Thomas nor Mailer is a miniaturist; though Thomas confines himself to the short essay, his subjects matter and reach far beyond the concerns local to a New York scientist/physician... Norman Mailer, when he hits, hits the target. He can balance his personality and his subject with a tension and force that is perfectly breathtaking--and inimitable. I think some of his non-fiction far surpasses his novels, though it may be too topical to survive.

Among the stylistic qualities most frequently mentioned by respondents, clarity was mentioned nine times; elegance/grace, six times; establishment of a consistent personal voice, six times; simplicity/spareness, four times. Clarity was mentioned by four publishing house editors, one university press editor, two magazine editors (including a scientific journal), and two newspaper editors. This result is not surprising, indicating a widespread recognition of clarity as a universal quality of good prose style. However, of those respondents who mentioned the quality elegance/grace, four were from publishing houses, two from university presses, and one each from a

magazine and one from a newspaper; this suggests that magazine and newspaper editors are more interested in functional prose and less insistent on elegance than are publishing house editors.

The most significant correlation, however, is between the mention of qualities falling under the general headings of voice and tone, and the mention of Didion, Thomas, Mailer, McPhee and Hellman. In particular, Didion's popularity with respondents (even those who merely mentioned her name, and did not offer any list of stylistic qualities, or a working definition of style) suggests that the establishment of a consistent personal voice and the crafting of an intimacy with the reader--both elements of expressive rather than referential writing--contribute to what most respondents called the best contemporary style. However, the survey's results were surprising, in that they violated my expectation that there would be a consistency between editors' affiliations and the writers they chose.

Didion's prose, particularlyin her essay "The White Album,"[2] is a striking example of a clear, unique, consistent voice. Her popularity with survey respondents (and the popularity of McPhee, Mailer, Hellman, and Trillin) indicates that she makes a strong, living connection with the reader. Certainly, her prose fulfills the more objective criteria--clarity, fluency, control spareness, wit, and richness of allusions. In addition, she is widely recognized by editors as a writer who crafts an intimacy with her reader, and establishes a consistent tone appropriate for her subject matter.

This survey establishes, at least to a degree, that beyond the basic requirements of clarity, orderliness, grace and fluency, editors think the best writers are those who have a clear conception of their audiences, and who craft an

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[2] Joan Didion, The White Album, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1979.

intimacy with that audience. Editors who judged Didion or McPhee the best stylist were clearly interested in writers who make their ability to connect with their audiences pay off.

Even if we accept the usefulness of models for teaching style--an assumption which has already been challenged--using the 12 stylists listed in Figure 1 as models for student writing presents us with a definite problem, particularly if we teach basic or developmental writers. Unless we are willing to spend an extensive period, perhaps more than a 14-week semester teaching our students to write expressively, then perhaps it is counterproductive to use models like Didion and McPhee. If we are committed to teaching our students to write clear, functional, referential prose, the sort that will enable them to respond to referential aim assignments in other disciplines, then perhaps we should use only the scientific writing model, as described by survey respondent Katherine Livingston, from Science Magazine:

> In scientific writing, the kind I am most accustomed to dealing with professionally, style is not an end in itself. Although in such writing it is often possible to separate style from content (that is, good scientific work is sometimes reported in poor prose and occasionally rhetorical flourishes may distract attention from flaws in reasoning), the ideal for scientific prose is a style that does not attract attention to itself. The most desirable qualities are orderliness, clarity and precision.

The survey indicated that editors consider voice and tone, and various aspects of these two stylistic components, among the most important elements of good prose style. This result has several implications for writing teachers, and suggests several directions for research on how instructors convey information about style (the more elusive tone and voice, as well as diction, syntax, and arrangement) to student writers.

The implications of this survey for writing teachers have mainly to do with models for teaching style. Didion and McPhee, both of whom write highly personal accounts, and both of whom are miniaturists in a sense, were the

writers most frequently cited, but both write essays which are primarily expressive, not referential. Those of us who teach writing should ask ourselves whether we wise to train our students only to write expressively, and to develop their own voice and tone, or whetehr we are primarily interested in helping them write referential prose with the essential, objective stylistic qualities of clarity, fluency, and orderliness. If we use models, we need give serious consideration to our pedagogical goals before we select those models.

For those of us who think it is important to teach students to develop a unique voice and tone, there remains the question of who we can impart such elusive skills. We need to learn more about the teaching of style--not only syntactic maturity, as documented in the quantitative research, but in the more subjective areas of voice and tone. We need to examine the stated stylistic goals which appear in our syllabuses and texthooks. We need to analyze what it is that instructors convey to students about voice and tone--in the classroom, in conferences, and through written comments on students' papers. We need to explore whether we say or think we are imparting information about style in one way, or whether in fact we are teaching it in an entirely different way--if we are teaching style at all. Finally, we must learn more about the awareness student writers have about matters of style, and how these perceptions conflict with or parralel their instructors' perceptions.

By pursuing the answers to these questions, through logging our own classes, oserving our colleagues, and developing more refined ways of evaluating conferences and marginalia as ways of teaching style, we may be able to document what is replicable about teaching diction, syntax, arrangement, tone and voice. We may also be able to describe more accurately what happens--or doesn't happen--in a course when we expose students to professional prose

models to teach style, and when we address the topic of style in conferences, classrooms, and marginalia. Until we understand more about the specific ways we communicate notions of style, particularly voice and tone, to our students, we will not understand and replicate the most efficient and creative ways of teaching style to beginning writers.

STYLE SURVEY RESULTS

Figure 1

EDITORS' AFFILIATIONS AND MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED WRITERS

STYLISTIC QUALITIES	1. (publisher) DIDION, THOMAS	2. (publisher) MCPHEE	3. (publisher) HELLMAN, MCPHEE	4. (publisher)	5. (publisher) ADLER, HOAGLAND	6. (publisher) DIDION, MCPHEE	7. (publisher) MCPHEE, DIDION, HOAGLAND, VIDAL	8. (publisher) DIDION, GASS, WOLFE	9. (newspaper) TRILLIN	10. (newspaper) TRILLIN	11. (newspaper) GALBRAITH	12. (newspaper) DIDION, MAILER, HOAGLAND	13. (monthly magazine)
Style cannot be defined	X	X			X								X
Tone appropriate for subject matter				X									X
Establishment of a consistent personal voice			X	X								X	X
Creation of an intimacy with the reader													
Audience awareness													X
Significance of subject matter						X							
Subtlety													
Richness of allusions/ associations													
Integration of form and content					X								
Wit and humor				X									
Simplicity/ spareness		X				X		X					
Fluency								X					
Clarity		X	X	X				X		X		X	
Elegance/ grace		X	X	X				X		X			X
Precision/control								X					
Orderliness													

STYLE SURVEY RESULTS

EDITORS' AFFILIATIONS AND MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED WRITERS

Figure 1 (cont.)

STYLISTIC QUALITIES	14. (monthly magazine) DIDION	15. (monthly magazine)	16. (monthly magazine) PRITCHETT, VIDAL	17. (monthly magazine) DIDION	18. (general scientific journal)	19. (university press)	20. (university press)	21. (university magazine) THOMAS, MAILER, GALBRAITH
Style cannot be defined								X
Tone appropriate for subject matter						X		X
Establishment of a consistent personal voice	X							X
Creation of an intimacy with the reader								X
Audience awareness								
Significance of subject matter								X
Subtlety								
Richness of allusions/ associations						X		
Integration of form and content								
Wit and humor								X
Simplicity/ spareness								X
Fluency					X			X
Clarity					X	X		
Elegance/ grace					X	X		X
Precision/control					X	X		
Orderliness					X			

LYNNE SPIEGELMIRE
BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Figure 2: Authors Cited More Than Once and Number of Times Cited

Joan Didion	7
John McPhee	4
Edward Hoagland	3
John Kenneth Galbraith	2
Norman Mailer	2
Lewis Thomas	2
Calvin Trillin	2
Gore Vidal	2
Theodore White	2
Tom Wolfe	2

Figure 3: Writers Mentioned At Lease Once by Respondents

Renata Adler	Toward a Radical Middle
Roger Angell	
Michael Arlen	Return to Ararat; articles in The New Yorker
Russell Baker	
Truman Capote	In Cold Blood, A Christmas Memory
Alexander Cockburn	articles in The Village Voice
*Dorrit Cohn	
Evan S. Connell	A Long Desire
Ann Cornelisen	Women of the Shadows, Torregreca
Joan Didion	Slouching Towards Bethlehem, The White Album
Elizabeth Drew	Senator, articles in The Atlantic, The New Yorker
Andrea Dworkin	Woman-Hating
Kai Erikson	Everything in Its Path
*Lillian Feder	
John Kenneth Galbraith	The Affluent Society, Money
Mavis Gallant	From the Fifteenth District
Michael Gartner	articles in the Des Moines Register and Tribune
William Gass	The World Within the Word
Elizabeth Hardwick	Seduction and Betrayal, Sleepless Nights
Lillian Hellman	Pentimento, An Unfinished Woman
Michael Herr	Dispatches
Edward Hoagland	The Edward Hoagland Reader
Jane Howard	Please Touch, A Different Woman, Families
Diane Johnson	
Horace Judson	The Eighth Day of Creation
Pauline Kael	
Hugh Kenner	The Counterfeiters, The Stoic Comedians, Joyce's Voice
*James Lawler	
David McCullough	The Path Between the Seas
Mary McCarthy	
John McPhee	Coming Into the Country, The John McPhee Reader
Norman Mailer	Miami and the Siege of Chicago, The Steps of the Pentagon
Peter Matthiessen	
Peter Medawar	
Earl Miner	
Jessica Mitford	The American Way of Death
Malcolm Muggeridge	
V.S. Naipaul	India, The Wonderful Civilization, In a Free State
Robert Pinsky	Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance
V.S. Pritchett	The Living Novel, The Mythmakers
William Safire	
Wilfrid Sheed	The Morning After, The Good Word
John Simon	Columns in Esquire
Red Smith	
Laurence Stapleton	
Lewis Thomas	The Medusa and the Snail, Notes of a Biology Watcher, Lives of a Cell
Calvin Trillin	Alice, Let's Eat and articles in The New Yorker

Figure 3 (continued)

R. Emmett Tyrell	Public Nuisances
John Updike	
Gore Vidal	Matters of Fact and Fiction
Rebecca West	
*Andrew Welsh	
Alan Wheelis	How People Change
Theodore White	
Edward O. Wilson	The Insect Societies, articles in Science
Tom Wolfe	The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test, The Right Stuff
Geoffrey Wolff	The Duke of Deception

* denotes authors published by Princeton University Press